

FEMALE GENIUS: VITAL SIGNS  
Melissa Gordon

*Hi Mel,*

*Sorry my head was in such a frazz earlier when I was reading your messages in work. Too much work and not enough staff at the gallery right now. But if you want to read Are you a female genius? then yes do that-- I wonder if you need to mention the stadelschule publication it came out in? I could maybe send you something to introduce it, a paragraph or two.*

*Big kiss and peacing out for the night, Eva xxxx*

In the 2014 biopic on Marlene Dumas in the New York times Magazine, the author begins by stating: "One measure of genius is *the life force*- what Harold Bloom has dubbed, referring to Samuel Johnson, "Falstaffian vitalism."

The article implies that Dumas is a genius because she has the characteristics of traditional genius: vitality and energy, Falstaffian bravado. But hers is "an exemplar of a heretofore all-but-unheralded form of genius, one specifically female. Shes open, giving, relational, fluid"

Eva, what do you think, shall we begin our discussion on Female Genius with the idea of Vitality? The vital signs, vitality, and vitriol of Female Genius hmm? What happens when a Female Genius gets a migraine?

Funny enough I sat down this morning with my second coffee and a blank Microsoft word document, and to my right on top of the stack of books lay the yellow "Painting Beyond Itself", which you recommended to me just as we were about to go to print with my catalogue which we named after your similiarly titled essay "Painting Behind Itself": I think your title is funnier in terms of dealing David Joselit's essay Painting Besides Itself, but still.

And- look at this- Isabelle Graw's essay in her Painting Beyond Itself is titled "The Value of Liveliness", and it's all about vitality, here's a quote:

"This view that painting has a life of its own and can therefore "think" or "speak" is prevalent among many French historians...I would argue that we are dealing with vitalist projections here...Painting is able to trigger such vitalist assumptions because of its specific language, or more precisely because of its specific indexicality.. (and) once (these indexical signs) appear in the context of painting they forcefully point to the absent author who seems to be somewhat physically present in them."

So in short, a painting projects the vitality, or the life-force, of the author, but interestingly, Graw also points to the longer history of liveliness and value:

"As a topos of appraisal, liveliness has an "astonishingly long and continued history". The production of life and liveliness was elevated to the status of an

ideal that painting and sculpture labored to achieve well into the nineteenth century”.

So what do you think of this- that the valuation of art focused on embodying the liveliness of – life, the world, nature, etc. *by* the artist and this segued naturally in Modernism into the valuation of the work of art itself, through and of the author, to be vital, or to *store* the vitality of life itself?

Makes you think of the holy grail, right, or some myth of the fountain of youth? What about Joan of Arc, was she a genius, I heard they burned her just enough for her clothes to come off and to show everyone that she was “just” a woman. Though this seems overly perverse, even for the English.

But YOUR title: Painting BEHIND Itself, is about this absent author who remains physically present, though hidden. As I remember, your essay Painting Behind Itself came about as you were telling me about an abandoned piece of writing you had started based on the coincidence that what is considered the *first* abstract painting in history consists of marks painted on top of, and obscuring, a female figure. In fact, the painting “Mme Kupka Amongst Verticals” shows literally, as you say, the *disappearing* of the female figure into Abstraction. It is the perfect example of the impression of vitality (the female figure), turning *into* the vitality of the authors mark-making. In this case, her husband is painting her out.

Does our Female Genius play with this presence and absence that Graw speaks about? You speak of Mme Kupka as staring out from behind the screen of abstraction

Quote

“In other words, what this comparison hopes to show is that in this early and officially endorsed abstract painting, the female figure is not separated from and anterior to the abstract marks on the canvas, but is substantially involved in their production. What it means for Madame Kupka, however, is that she is not really there at all.”

Endquote

Is our Female Genius like a Genie appearing and disappearing with smoke and screens?

*Hey Mel! I'm looking back through our emails to see what the question was! Like for me the question started with an absence -- as it was in your work -- looking for an equivalent character or persona that, no matter how dated it might be, (the genius, the master painter) continues to prevail in common currency. So when you start to look for it you find that it's an archetype that just doesn't exist as a specifically female presence in history. It's not so much a question of saying there ARE master female painters and female geniuses, tending in your argument towards building a similar construct to the male version, as much as asking why in the development of these archetypes has there been so much reliance on exclusion. When I started thinking about this I googled female geniuses, because it's such an*

*overblown ridiculous cliché, only to find that the term hardly exists in the positive sense: there was only one book from the 80s and a host of articles saying there's no such thing. Which is when you led me to Battersby's book on gender and genius. It's also partly because in my research on great modern female artists the institution that cropped up the most was the mental institution! So there's a way in which the same things that are validated in great men of art or letters (or science to a lesser extent) is characterized as mental illness in women, which is largely what Battersby writes about. Anyway the quiz takes a number of these biographies (isa genzken, yayoi kusama, jean rhys, Lisa dwan etc) and makes a serious joke out of their personal lives and the way their work is evaluated to a certain extent along the lines of how well they're able to take care of themselves or others, how modest they are, how realistic their ideas or fantasies or dreams are etc etc. it's a list of ways of being taken out of the game in a way. Xx Eva*

OK yes, the game. Lets get to that, but first, lets go over the root of this term, "Genius", especially how Christine Battersby writes about it in "Gender and Genius" because I think it sums up the vitality thing too.

Here's Battersby on ancient genius, or Roman geni.

"For the patrilineal Romans, genius was 'a simile for the male seed, which from the father begets the son and from the son goes on to continue the race'. This seed was not simply mundane (physical) sperm; it was a seed that was ripened in the bodies of heroic male ancestors, and in the soil that had been cleared and planted by generations of males, Genius was a sort of genetic coding that entitled a male to property, lands, rights and power over women and slaves."

So genius is a fluid, what? So embarrassing, right? I think didn't we also start talking about female genius out of our conversations on your research into the etymology of the word Embarrassment?

So Genius come from "Geni" is linked to a Jinn, as in a genie in a bottle, a trickster; it's also linked to 'gene' or genealogy, of course, to the term 'genial' and, my favourite: a bad temper. In my family they say our bad temper has been passed down through our Sicilian blood, like a feeling of heat and boiling: a flashpoint.

*Hey hon no problem I will edit and make clear this is a developing discussion between us.*

*This week has been a TOTAL CLUSTERFUCK,  
Virtual hug*

*Here's the essay I've been working on that I'm going to read, this sets the stage for talking about the game of genius, the burning body and liquidity of gestures I think, xx mel*

## Luxury Goods: A Burning Desire:

Ownership is the root of all grievance: we can see this in the first code of law, an ancient text developed solely to bring order to the exchange of goods. I come from an Italian American family, and the feeling of grievance in general falls under the much-used term “Agita”, a word which translates bluntly as heartburn but which also applies to a kind of general, but distinctly coming from the gut sense of agitation. So one could say “The eggplant has given me agita”, but also “Your moaning is giving me agita”. There’s also a strong sense in Italian Americans of the imagination of discomfort: so a common saying might be: “Just thinking about the situation with So-and-so gives me Agita”. Recently, I’ve been noting a certain sense of discomfort when I think about the relationship between art and luxury goods, a rising of heat and unease inside of me when I think how the notion of value has seeped like a fluid into every crack of life.

In Silicon Valley slang, you, or we all, have what’s called a burn rate, which means basically how fast you shed money, as an institution and, so I guess also, as an individual. Thinking about this on daily terms, there are things put into motion every day in order to burn: I have to feed the body with caffeine, nourishment and alcohol, and every calorie has a price. I may relax but I feel like I’m still burning, and in fact I am: consuming energy, bandwidth, paper, landfill.

In thinking about the term Burn Rate on the process-end of production in making art, I recently re-read Fredric Jameson’s “Postmodernism - and the rest of the title that is often forgotten: “or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”. Since capitalism is the fastest moving game in town, I thought I’d look back twenty five years to see the architecture of our most recent, seemingly innocent encounter with goods and culture, which might somehow frame our current moment better.

It’s a bucolic read, from 1991: “What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods... now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation.”

A feeling of confusion gave me a hot sensation: was there a time when the aesthetic was autonomous from an economy?

I recalled, like a flashback, reading an essay my friend Angie sent me nearly two years ago called the Confidence Man, as I pushed my twins around the park when they were weeks old. Round and round I went, life at its very core destroyed by sleep deprivation, squinting at a tiny iphone screen, coincidentally just meters away from Edgar Allen Poe’s residence in London, whom the essay begins by giving credit to for creating the character of “The Diddler”, ie., the confidence man- otherwise known as a con man.

The confidence man is an American character, a product of the geography of a new, unregulated country: he is a traveling salesman who arrives to sell what in the end turns out to be a mere fantasy.

The 1857 book "The Confidence Man-His Masquerade" by Herman Melville follows the character and the structure of the Diddle- in the new Yorker essay Angie sent me the author lists this fantastic group of characters from Melville's book, on a boat together:

"The passenger is right about this army of diddlers, except for one detail: the many scamps among the passengers- a doctor peddling herbal remedies, along with a stock trader, an employment agent, a philosopher, a man in rags, a couple of well-dressed men--- will prove in the end to be the same man, who, in his various disguises, raises wind from stem to stern, diddling passengers out of their money, their health, their dignity- and, above all, out of their trust in their own judgement".

But the con man is not a simple thief. He does peddle a concrete good: stories. In fact, all you might get from a good con, is the feeling of being swept along in the fiction of the moment: belief in what turn out to be lies, which feel good at the time. You've lost something, but you still have the fantasy.

The con-man is a shape-shifter, he turns into the disguise which will enable you to trust him most: truth is fluid and whats on sale is belief- again to quote the essay:

"What the Confidence Man (in all his forms) offers his marks... in short.. is that the future is sure to be better."

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Eva, what does confidence have to do with our Female Genius? Confidence is the story we believe in, and belief is what we instill our confidence in.

It makes me think of your question, that you say about my work in your essay Painting Behind Itself: Who gets to be abstract?

Who *does* get to be abstract? As in who gets to be off-point, random, bad-tempered, who gets to be not-giving-a-fuck, lying, you-don't-have-a-clue anyway, I was just joking, until I'm not, then its not funny at all duh?

The inverse of confidence, is the con. And the inverse of abstraction is literalness, or making sense.

*Hey Mel -- swamped with work, sorry. Have I told you lately that working with Swiss women is annoying? if not remind me to tell you about that.*

*I would say to people who think the term genius is dated that actually the great male painter and the genius are absolutely in common currency and on the rise, by the way! It's very much tied in to a neoliberal economic climate that encourages the dismantling of the social network or social welfare state -- in a way it's the zenith of the "meritocracy" ideology where the best will always rise to the top no matter what, because their innate talent will always come through, whether or not they have free education etc. In fact, the genius character according to that logic is only hindered by the rules and red tape of social provision. Actually I'd even go so far as to say that a society that really believes in genius in that sense, ironically enough, is a society that elects Trump, because he doesn't need boring advice or expertise or experience or community, it's enough just to have force of personality and is a great story that ignores all the other input that goes into someone doing great things. Kind of like the lone cowboy myth or something.*

*I'm keen as well to have the term "female genius" be more of a locus of investigation rather than just be a hashtag... on that point I'd agree with Marina because I'm not mad on the Pin-Up magazine version where you just start saying X is a female genius, know what I mean? Like the point is to deconstruct the ideas not just to go around labeling people geniuses according to the already existing cliché.*  
> *Ok hope you get the gist of all that!*  
> *Xx loads of love and let me know if that helps, Eva*  
> *Xx*

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How do we instill value in a mark which is the embodied form of an artist? How do we have confidence in this mark, this author? How does a Female Genius insert herself into the conversation of the vitalist projection of objects and ideas? Who gets to be funny and not serious? Who gets to make fun of themselves because it doesn't imply self-criticism or anxiety?

But what if the vitality of the gesture is inscribed not so much through the character of the artist onto a surface (like a fluid moving through a vessel), but rather the unfolding of events, or imagined narrative, that the artist shows us (like the washing of a surface)? Does the Gene of geneology rare its head?

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In Helen Molesworth's essay "How to install art as a feminist" she spends a lot of time dwelling on the conundrum of the genealogies of female and feminist artists in that quote:

*Geneologies for art made by women aren't so clear, largely because they are structured by a shadowy absence.*

One model she suggests is that women artists find the gestures of their often absence predecessors outside of a timeline, and that they seek "attachment rather than separation", that there is a lovely relational quality between female

artists, and that this “ releases women to deal with their fathers and encounter their siblings on equal terms.”

But what this argument ignores is that women’s gestures are still less valuable than men’s, and it does nothing to address the accumulation of women’s gestures into art history.

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In the essay “Notes on Gesture” the theorist Giorgio Agamben tells us that “Cinema leads images back to the homeland of gesture”.

What is a gesture? Asks Agamben. It is something which is ‘inscribed’ into the sphere of action, but is neither acting or making- it is neither production or performance. Not the mark or the act that makes the mark.

So in reading Agamben, I began to understand gesture as the flickering of firelight animating a cave painting of jumping animals, the stills of film juttering together to make movement. I am understanding gesture as the imaginative jump in our heads which believes in the action that created the physical trace of the event.

“it is as if a silent invocation  
calling for the liberation of the image into gesture  
arose from the entire history of art. This is what in ancient  
Greece was expressed by the legends in which statues  
break the ties holding them and begin to move”

How then, can gesture ever be simply material? Or a material good?

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The highest price ever paid for a work by a female artist is currently 9.8 million dollars for Bluewald by Cady Noland, sold in May 2015.

Noland has written very powerfully about the Con Man, in her 1990 essay “Towards a Meta-Language of Evil”.

“The game is a machine composed of interconnected mechanistic devices... A con or a snow job is the site at which X preys upon the hopes, fears, and anxieties of Y for ulterior motives and/or personal gain... These machinations exist a priori of X or Y as an indifferent set of tools and could conceivably be picked up by anyone and used against anyone else”

In November, 2011, the night before a Sotheby’s auction, Noland disavowed ownership of her work Cowboys Milking (put on auction just after her record auction sale months previous), thus effectively erasing millions of dollars from

the world. There is no trace of the erasure, though, because it was completely imaginary. Those, say 6 million dollars never existed, and they never will exist. It is perhaps one of the biggest cons in art history.

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Luxury goods are items that can be thought of as unnecessary, extravagant, and out of reach. Going back, it might be interesting to think about Luxury Goods in relation to the Jameson essay, which in addition to stating that Postmodernism abolishes peoples relationships to a radical past, explicates Jameson's notation of a move in the cultural field from depth (of feeling) to surface (of understanding): To quote: "But there are ... significant differences between the high modernist and the postmodernist moment, ... The first.. is the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense.."

Now, 25 years later, I might say there has been a move from flatness to distance: the flat surfaces around us are out of reach, or project in their blue light an out-of-reachness. The distance between a burning desire and unattainable goods or ideas point to the creation of all aspects of our lives into luxury goods, even the most basic needs like homes, sleep, food, politics: we have machines of insatiability, with endless scroll, that are never satisfied inputting into our burning bodies. A few years ago a very wealthy woman confided in me that everyone she knew was struggling, no matter how rich they were. And weirdly, I don't think she was bullshitting. What you take in is never as much as you burn.

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*ok Mel -- this can be a very \*kein stress\* process :) Eva*

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The gesture is fluid. It IS Fluid, adjective and noun.

I'm interested in the uncontrollability and immeasurability of fluids.

Our female Genius is also fluid, but not in a 'its cool, things are casual, my schedule is moveable' kind of way. Fluid in the way she fills the cracks, she's been there, she is there, she will be there.

Eva, lately I've been thinking that a painting happens all over the fucking place. And what if a canvas is just in the way?

Americans call it the support

But nothing is goddamn solid anymore.

*Mel: longish email sure— whatever is useable!*

*Everything ok with you?*

*Sorry — fedex insane, , all dicks swinging today!*

*Heres the quiz!*



*XX Eva*